

Message Text

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SUBJECT: CAMPAIGN '75 - ELECTION ISSUES

REF: BANGKOK 19145

BEGIN SUMMARY: SUCCESS IN THAI ELECTORAL CONTESTS PRIMARILY DEPENDS ON PERSONALITIES AND REPUTATION. THE CONSULATES CONFIRM THAT BUSINESS-AS-USUAL CAMPAIGNS, WHICH STICK TO TRADITIONAL PERSONALITY MATCHES RATHER THAN ISSUES, ARE THE ORDER OF THE DAY. SINCE THE ELECTION CAMPAIGN HAS HARDLY GOTTERN UNDERWAY, HOWEVER, CANDIDATES MAY NOT YET HAVE DEFINED THE IMPORTANT ISSUES. THERE ARE PRESENTLY ONLY VAGUE OUTLINES OF WHAT COULD BE CAMPAIGN ISSUES IN THAILAND, INCLUDING THE AMERICAN MILITARY PRESENCE. END SUMMARY.

1. PERSONALITY MEANS ISSUE PAUCITY

A. PERSONALITY AND REPUTATION ARE KEY FACTORS IN THAI ELECTORAL CONTESTS. PERSONALITY MATCHES HAVE ALWAYS

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GENERATED THE MOST HEAT IN THAI ELECTIONS, AND THIS

CAMPAIGN IS NO EXCEPTION. ONE CANDIDATE FROM THE NORTH TOLD THE CHIANG MAI CONSULATE THAT HE HADN'T READ HIS PARTY'S PLATFORM BECAUSE HE WAS TOO BUSY CAMPAIGNING. ALL THIS MEANS THAT ONE'S PERSONAL IMAGE, NOT PROGRAMS FOR GOVERNING, IS CRUCIAL TO ELECTORAL SUCCESS.

B. THE PAUCITY OF ELECTION ISSUES ALSO REFLECTS A WEAKNESS OF THE POLITICAL PARTIES, WHO APPARENTLY OFFER LITTLE GUIDANCE TO THEIR CANDIDATES. PARTY AFFILIATION IS OFTEN BASED ON FINANCIAL SUPPORT OR PERSONAL ASSOCIATION, RATHER THAN A CANDIDATE'S IDEOLOGICAL COMMITMENTS. THE CHIANG MAI CONSULATE REPORTS THAT MANY CANDIDATES HAVE NOT RECEIVED CAMPAIGN POSTERS WHICH THEIR PARTIES ARE PREPARING FOR THEM. THUS, MOST POSTERS IN EVIDENCE ARE LOCALLY PRINTED AND STRESS PERSONAL BACKGROUND, EDUCATION AND PAST CIVIC ACCOMPLISHMENTS.

C. OUR TRAVELS IN CENTRAL THAILAND SUPPLEMENT REPORTING FROM THE CHIANG MAI AND UDORN CONSULATES THAT THE CANDIDATES HAVE NOT YET DEVELOPED MUCH IN THE WAY OF CAMPAIGN ISSUES. EVERYONE SPEAKS VAGUELY OF WANTING TO IMPROVE THE ECONOMIC LIFE OF HIS POTENTIAL CONSTITUENTS. BECAUSE THE UPCOUNTRY ELECTORATE IS PRIMARILY AGRARIAN, CAMPAIGN PROMISES FOCUS ON BRIDGING THE ECONOMIC GAP, RAISING RURAL INCOMES, OR EXPOUNDING SCHEMES TO INCREASE PRODUCTIVITY.

D. SO FAR THE CAMPAIGN IS SLOW TO GET UNDER WAY, AND FEW PARTY LEADERS HAVE TRAVELED UPCOUNTRY TO SUPPORT THEIR LOCAL MEMBERS. THEIR APPEARANCE MIGHT INJECT ISSUES INTO THE CAMPAIGN. MOST PARTY LEADERS AND SPOKESMEN ARE IN BANGKOK, SPEAKING AT UNIVERSITY SEMINARS AND GIVING PRESS INTERVIEWS. COMMENTS MADE ON THESE OCCASIONS, THOUGH THEY MAY NOT DEVELOP INTO CAMPAIGN ISSUES, HAVE RECEIVED PRESS ATTENTION. BUT IT IS DIFFICULT TO DIFFERENTIATE, ON THE BASIS OF THESE STATEMENTS, WHETHER THERE IS ANY MEANINGFUL DIFFERENCE BETWEEN MANY OF THE POLITICAL PARTIES. TYPICAL OF WHAT THE NEWSPAPERS ARE CARRYING ARE THE FOLLOWING STATEMENTS FROM PRAMAN ADIREKSAN, LEADER OF THE THAI NATIONAL PARTY (TNP):
THE CAPITAL SHOULD BE MOVED OUT OF BANGKOK; THE TNP WILL
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PROMOTE HOME INDUSTRY AND EDUCATION, AND SEND TEACHERS TO REMOTE SCHOOLS; LAW AND ORDER NEEDS TO BE RESTORED; INFLATION AND EXTERNAL INFILTRATION ARE BOTHERSOME; THE GOVERNMENT SHOULD SUBSIDIZE BUS SERVICE FOR LOW INCOME GROUPS; A TNP CABINET WOULD NOT SPEND THE NATIONAL BUDGET ON ROADS, BUT ALLOW THE BUILDING OF PRIVATE TOLL ROADS; CERTAIN BANGKOK STREETS SHOULD BE CLOSED AND TURNED OVER TO VENDORS AT NIGHT. SIMILAR STATEMENTS ECHO FROM OTHER PARTY HEAD-

QUARTERS. WHETHER SUCH STATEMENTS ARE MEANINGFUL SUGGESTIONS OF FURTHER POLICIES IS DEBATABLE.

E. IT IS ALSO INTERESTING TO NOTE THAT THERE HAS APPARENTLY BEEN LITTLE CRITICISM OF GOVERNMENT PERFORMANCE, NORMALLY A WELL USED WHIPPING BOY DURING THAI ELECTIONS. PART OF THE EXPLANATION RESTS WITH THE ABSENCE OF A GOVERNMENT PARTY WHICH, WOULD INJECT THE GOVERNMENT DIRECTLY INTO THE CAMPAIGN. FURTHERMORE, THE PRESENT GOVERNMENT IS SEEN AS A ROYAL CREATION WHICH IS ANXIOUS TO TURN OVER THE REINS OF POWER.

2. AMERICAN MILITARY PRESENCE

A. CHIANG MAI REPORTS THAT THERE IS LITTLE EVIDENCE THAT THE AMERICAN MILITARY PRESENCE IS OF UPCOUNTRY CONCERN. CANDIDATES AFFILIATED WITH PARTIES WHOSE BANGKOK SPOKESMEN MAKE STATEMENTS ON THE SUBJECT SEEM TO FEEL THAT THERE IS LITTLE LOCAL APPEAL. UDORN REPORTS THAT FEW CONVERSATIONS WITH CANDIDATES HAVE TURNED TO THIS ISSUE. A TNP CANDIDATE SAID HE STRESSES THAT THE U.S. PRESENCE IS THE RESULT OF PREVIOUS COMMITMENTS AND THAT ITS CONTINUATION IS UP TO THE RTG. ONE EXCEPTION IS KHLAEO NORAPATI, LEADER OF THE SOCIALIST UNITED FRONT. HE TOLD THE UDORN CONSULATE THAT AMERICAN TROOPS HAD TO GO, BUT HIS PARTY HAS SCANT POSSIBILITIES, AND THIS ATTITUDE OF HIS IS NOT NEW.

B. THERE IS A SUBTLE DIFFERENCE IN THE WAY SOME POLITICAL PARTIES ARE PLAYING THE AMERICAN PRESENCE ISSUE IN THEIR BANGKOK PRESS RELEASE. TNP SAYS THAT THE AMERICAN TROOPS ARE IN THAILAND AT THE BEHEST AND CONTROL OF THE RTG AND THENCE THE RTG CAN SEND THEM AWAY WHENEVER IT DECIDES TO DO SO. THE TNP SUGGESTS, HOWEVER, THAT

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THAILAND SHOULD NOT PRECIPITIOUSLY EXPEL THE AMERICANS (REFTEL). SOMETIMES, TNP SECRETARY-GENERAL CHATCHAI CHUNHAWAN OR LEADER PRAMAN ADIREKSAN WILL TIE THE AMERICAN MILITARY PRESENCE TO THE SITUATION IN CAMBODIA OR LAOS, SAYING THAT, WHEN THE NORTH VIETNAMESE TROOPS LEAVE, SO WILL THE AMERICANS. OTHER PARTIES, EVEN IF THEY DON'T CALL FOR REMOVAL OF THE AMERICANS, INDICATE THAT THEY WILL PRESSURE FOR TIGHTER RTG CONTROLS OVER AMERICAN ACTIVITIES AND ORGANIZATIONS IN THAILAND. THE SOCIALIST PARTIES MAKE THE STRONGEST STATEMENTS ABOUT THE NEED TO EXTRACT THE AMERICANS SOONEST. A NUMBER OF PARTIES SKIRT THE WHOLE SPECTRUM OF FOREIGN POLICY AND SAY THAT THAILAND SHOULD BE FRIENDS WITH ALL COMERS.

3. COMMENT: MOST OBSERVERS FEEL THAT PARLIAMENTARY

CANDIDATES IN THAILAND ARE ELECTED ON THE BASIS OF PERSONALITY. THE CAMPAIGN SO FAR, WITH ITS PAUCITY OF ISSUESN SEEMS TO BEAR OUT THAT JUDGMENT. IF AND WHEN CRUCIAL ISSUES APPEAR, POLICY STANDS WILL PROBABLY BE MORE IMPORTANT IN URBAN AREAS, SUCH AS BANGKOK, THAN IN RURAL CONSTITUENCIES.

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